

U.S., in Sharper Tone, Is Worried By Soviets' Pressure on Lithuania

By ANDREW ROSENTHAL

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WASHINGTON, March 20 — The White House sharpened the tenor of its statements on Lithuania today, saying an increase in the Kremlin's political pressure against the republic's independence movement was "cause for concern." The Bush Administration called on Moscow to open immediate talks on self-determination with the Lithuanian Government.

"We continue to urge a constructive dialogue," said Marlin Fitzwater, President Bush's spokesman.

Reading a statement, he said: "This would be complicated by an atmosphere of intimidation and increasing tension. In this regard, the activities and statements of the Soviet Government over the past few days are cause for concern. We are watching the situation closely."

Administration officials said the White House statement was not based on a real fear that Mr. Gorbachev was about to use military force in Lithuania. Mr. Bush himself said today that the Soviet Union was "still talking about peaceful change, that's essential."

'Very Good About That'

"They've been very good about that, the Soviets have all through Eastern Europe," he said. "That's what everybody wants to see, is a peaceful evolution in Lithuania."

But the White House statement, which was also read to reporters by a State Department spokesman, represented a marked change in the tone of the Administration's public comments on Lithuania.

Administration officials had previously called the tensions between Moscow and Vilnius an "internal matter," and refrained from commenting on the dispute over Lithuania's declaration of independence to avoid putting President Mikhail S. Gorbachev in a position from which it would be harder to find a face-saving exit.

Mr. Fitzwater and other Administration officials said today's tougher statement was prompted by unannounced military maneuvers in Lithuania in recent days, as well as other military movements and the Soviet Govern-

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Through Diplomatic Contacts

Mr. Fitzwater said the United States has conveyed its position on Lithuania to the Soviet Union through "any number" of diplomatic contacts in recent months, including Mr. Bush's own meeting with Mr. Gorbachev in Malta last December.

As with other Administration pronouncements on Lithuania, the White House statement today drew a fine line between recognizing the Lithuanian Government as a sovereign power and going against American policy, which never recognized that the Baltic nation was a legitimate part of the Soviet Union in the first place despite the forcible annexation of Lithuania in 1940.

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The officials said those moves were interpreted largely as negotiating tactics by Mr. Gorbachev. "They're still jockeying for position in a prenegotiations phase," one official said.

In this context, the officials said Mr. Fitzwater sought with his statement to recognize publicly that Moscow had stepped up political polemics against Lithuania. They also said the United States wanted to be on the record with a forceful, but not threatening, restatement of its policy toward Lithuania, which Washington has never recognized as being part of the Soviet Union.

"It seemed to be a good way of reminding Gorbachev about the promises he has made about not using force," one Administration official said.

Mr. Fitzwater said the United States believed that Moscow's assurances that it will not use military force in Lithuania "are the operating policies and feelings of the Soviet Union."

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NEW YORK TIMES

dictations here that we have to be concerned with," he said, referring to news reports on Monday about the military maneuvers in Lithuania and about a possible increase in security at nuclear power plants in Lithuania.

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Upheaval in the East: A Baltic Land at an Impasse



Associated Press

As a nervous standoff continued between Lithuania and the Kremlin, thousands of people gathered yesterday in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, to show support for the proclamation of independence.